

to a modern reader, rather painful. Of course he wrote all the cheap pathos and heroics with his tongue in his cheek. The audiences of those days wanted a wronged and noble woman, a sinning but repentant man, and a high moral tone. Wilde gave them what they wanted, using it all as frame-work for his wit; and the combination of Mayfair morals with was irresistible. But the effort of keeping his tongue in his cheek was exhausting. In the summer of 1894<sup>he</sup> took his family for a holiday to Worthing, where, at Number 5 Esplanade, he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* in three weeks. All the stage tricks—the long speeches, the rhetoric, the sentiment, the "asides," the "curtain" situations, and the rest of the lumber of mummery—are absent in this play. Even the paradoxes have almost disappeared. It is witty in a new way—an intellectual romp, a piece of sheer fun and hilarity, the apotheosis of Tomfoolery. If Wilde had not written *Earnest* we could never have believed the assertion of his friends that he was the most amusing of men. In his other works he reveals himself as a serene wit, a perfecter of epigrams, a polisher of periods and paradoxes. But here, though wittier than ever, he is humorous as well. The play had no predecessor in our dramatic literature and has had no successor. It stands alone. Shakespeare, in *Henry IV*, gave us the comedy of humanity, glowing and rich and passionate as life itself; Ben Jonson and Goldsmith gave us the comedy of character; Congreve, Sheridan, Wilde himself in his earlier plays, gave us the comedy of manners; Shaw has given us the comedy of morals; but in *The Importance of Being Earnest* we have, for the first and only time, the comedy of mere merriment. With its production by George Alexander on (appropriately enough) St. Valentine's Day, 1895, Wilde entered his rightful kingdom. No one has ever disputed his sovereignty in the realm of Ridicule. Even criticism halts before *The Importance of Being Earnest*; though a few pains-taking penmen, envying the ease of its achievement, have gravely asserted that it cannot be compared with more serious works. We agree.

The gaiety of the nation in the early months of 1895 <sup>'was,</sup> however, shortly to be eclipsed. In April of that year Wilde brought an action for criminal libel against the Marquis of Queensberry, "Though under no illusion as to the folly of the quite unselfish suit-at-law he had been persuaded to

begin" (to quote Bernard Shaw), Wilde  
nevertheless utterly